JEFF SKILES
COMMENTARY / CONTRAILS

What's In a Name?

The incredibly confusing morass of airport identifiers

BY JEFF SKILES

The blackness of night has fallen outside the windscreen, the ultimate finality of day, the great equalizer. We are in our thin metal cocoon jetting across the stratosphere for a place far, far away. LIRF (Leonardo da Vinci Airport in Rome) to be exact. I seem to be doing a lot of LIRF trips lately, its unpleasant-sounding name being no barrier. The IFR alternate is an equally confusing LIPZ (this is Marco Polo International, which is also in Rome). How did these destinations acquire such unusual monikers anyway?

I began my flight training in the 1970s at MSN, which seemed a logical enough identifier given that the airport sat on the outskirts of Madison, Wisconsin, although it has alternatively been known as Truax Field or Dane County Regional Airport over the years. But LIRF can be a conundrum.

WHERE IN THE WORLD IS LIRF?

LIRF is otherwise identified as FCO in IATA (International Air Transport Association) code but is more commonly known as Rome, Italy. But why isn't it ROM? In Rome's case the airport is variously known as Leonardo da Vinci Airport or Rome-Fiumicino. For some reason it has two names. At least Rome-Fiumicino makes FCO somewhat logical.

Why do airports have so many different and confusing identifiers? The secret lies in who exactly is doing the naming. When this all started airports had no identifiers at all. The national weather service used two letter identifiers to name their weather stations, LA being Los Angeles for instance, PD stood for Portland, but for airports—nothing. Then airports sprung up all over, and some means of separating them needed to be developed. So, the FAA developed the pr naming convention.

The first hurdle is to decide if an airp a commercial airport or not. If it is a com cial airport, meaning it has scheduled ai carrier service or once did, it will have a identifier consisting of three letters. If it of the many noncommercial but still pub strips—you know, the ones we frequent- FAA assigns a three or four number/lett code depending on its access restriction three grass runways where I keep my ai are unlikely to ever be frequented by air traffic, but it's still a so-called "public" a so it has the three-letter identifier of C3 Strips that the FAA deems to be "privat ports sport a four number/letter code su 4MI7 or WI56. These will contain two that are always contiguous and normall not always, represent the postal code of state that the airport is located in. The t letters may be at the beginning, in the n or at the end.

THE BIG BOYS

Commercial airports have identifiers pr derived from the location or the name o airport. Atlanta is ATL; Fargo is FAR. Occasionally, like Rome, the identifier c stray from the location rule, though. Th identifier for Kalispell, Montana, is GPI Glacier Park International. Apparently port authorities and the chamber of co got together and renamed it to represe region's greatest attraction. You won't f GPI if you're buying an airline ticket, th To the airlines it is known under its IA of FCA for Flathead County Airport.

Only rarely will the authorities ch identifier of an airport and even then the most extraordinary circumstance

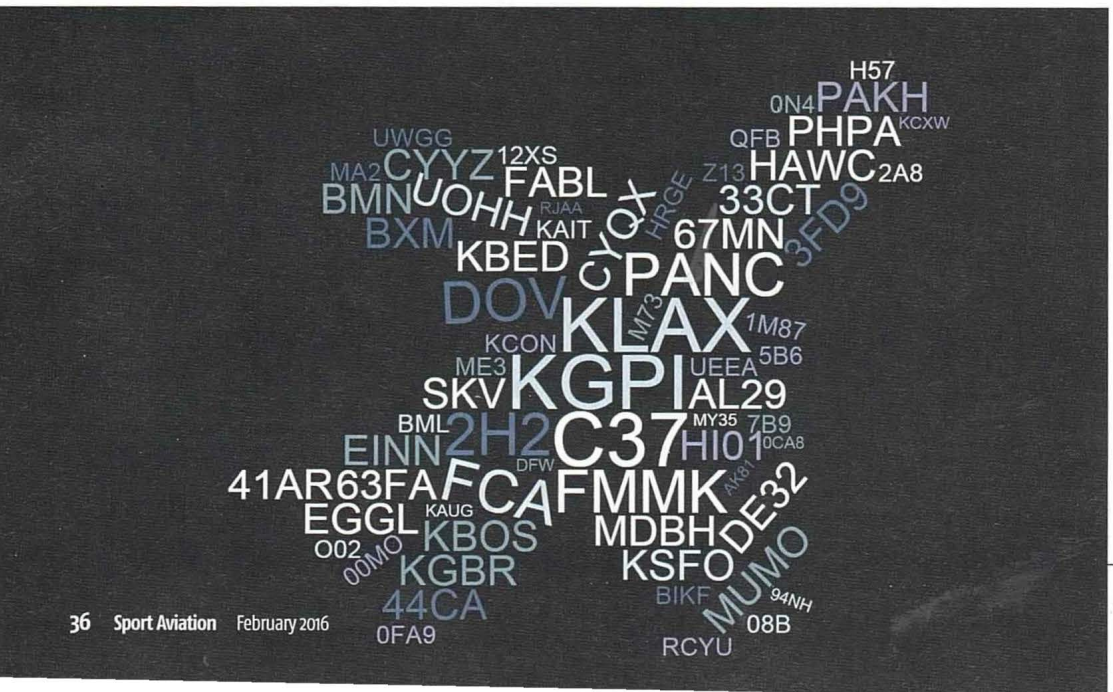

ILLUSTRATION BY J

Idlewild (IDL) in New York existed for 15 years as an international gateway before being renamed John F. Kennedy International Airport (JFK) in 1963 for obvious reasons. O'Hare however has a much less famous namesake and will be forever known as ORD in keeping with the airport's original name of Orchard Field.

Some identifiers have become such a part of common speech that their airports are known by no other name. LAX would a prime example. But why is Wilmington, North Carolina, ILM? Well, there are a few letters that are reserved. The Navy laid claim to anything beginning with "N." The Canadians appropriated all the "Y" identifiers. Commercial broadcast radio and TV stations east of the Mississippi all begin with "W" and west of the Mississippi they begin with "K," making those two letters unavailable. So Wilmington can't be WIL. I guess ILM is the next best thing.

AROUND THE WORLD

Internationally things get much muddier. Outside the United States, airport codes are governed by the IATA and ICAO (International Civil Aviation Association). IATA is fairly straightforward since it's more of an international expansion of the FAA three-letter system, although there are exceptions where the common FAA code may be assigned by IATA to an airport on the other side of the world. ICAO however is definitely a code that needs patience and skill to break.

ICAO requires a four-letter identifier that follows a very specific system. Here in the United States it is fairly straightforward; we simply add a K before the IATA identifier. The K means that it is an airport lying within the continental United States. Canadian airports all begin with C, Australia with Y, but after that the country-letter logic falls apart a bit.

You'll notice I said airports in the continental United States begin with a K. U.S. airports in other parts of the world follow a hybrid IATA/ICAO format. Alaskan and Hawaiian commercial airports begin with P for instance. Anchorage is PANC; Honolulu is PHNL.

Most countries are assigned a two-letter introductory code that to the initiated says everything about where the country is located geographically. ICAO has split the world up into 26 regions, each represented by a letter of the alphabet all the way from A, Western South Pacific, to Z, China and Mongolia. The first letter represents the region, the second the country within the region. Charles De Gaulle airport (LFPG) in Paris, France, begins with LF, L being the regional identifier for southern Europe, F stands, not surprisingly, for France. Germany begins with EG meaning northern Europe, E, and Germany, G. The third and fourth letters represent the actual airport, which can be pretty confusing outside of North America

PUT TO THE TEST

Let's try a couple. Reykjavik, Iceland, is BIKF. B is the ICAO designation for the northern Atlantic area encompassing Iceland and Greenland, I is obviously for Iceland, and the main commercial airport is actually called Keflavik. BI for Iceland, KF for Keflavik. Tokyo, Japan, is a bit less intuitive with RJAA. It starts out well with R for the far western expanse of the Pacific Ocean, and J for Japan makes logical sense. But AA? The main international airport is actually called Narita International because it is located in Narita, Japan. There are two A's in Narita so maybe that's it.

SEARCHING FOR BHM

I can remember a flight many decades ago when the captain and I were entrusted with a Douglas DC-9 full of passengers bound for BHM. Problem was neither he nor I had the slightest idea where BHM might be. We were sitting on the ground in BWI (Baltimore), and a quick perusal of the flight plan showed that we were expected to fly to BHM in approximately two and a half hours. Two and a half hours is a long flight in a DC-9, making the determination of where BHM might actually be even more difficult.

Flight attendants are required to memorize the three letter IATA identifiers of every city in the system, but pilots had no such mandate. There could be 60 or 70 destinations on the line, and a flight attendant could quickly discern DFW from DTW or TPA from TOL, but BHM was a new city for the line and the rear cabin could shed no light on the mystery. Wherever BHM was located, we would be spending the night and the better part of tomorrow sampling its charms.

Ultimately we both came to the conclusion that since we had reports of very fine weather at BHM, NOTAMs showing little of concern, and a flight plan displaying a routing that would serve much like a yellow brick road, our problem would solve itself in time. Eventually we would have every hope of seeing BHM off the nose, we would land, and that would be that.

How could we be so dense? Well, this was before GPS, cellphones, or the Internet so it was a simpler time. That night we flew from VOR to VOR checking off the points on our flight plan one by one and eventually Birmingham, Alabama, appeared like magic in the windshield. Who knew?

LIRF DECODED

So let's take this back to where we began. Where is LIRF? L stands for southern Europe, I for Italy, and the RF? Rome-Fiumicino Airport obviously. There you go, now it all makes perfect sense! EAA

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